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Federal-State Partnership Proposes Plan to Involve Communities in the Cleanup and Restoration of the Lower Passaic River and Study of Newark Bay

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FOR RELEASE: Thursday, August 18, 2005

(#05094) New York, NY & Trenton, NJ – A partnership of federal and state agencies is seeking public input on a draft plan to involve the public in the Lower Passaic River Restoration Project and in the study of Newark Bay. The draft community involvement plan (CIP) outlines 31 community involvement tools and activities, identifies how they will be used to address community concerns, and advocates public involvement in cleanup, natural resource injury assessment, and restoration activities.

"The partner agencies are committing to provide the community with meaningful involvement and accurate, timely and understandable information," said U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Acting Regional Administrator Kathleen C. Callahan. "We are breaking new ground and providing efficiency with this comprehensive, one-stop shopping approach to providing opportunities for public input."

"This CIP signifies the commitment by all the partners to ensure community collaboration and input. More importantly, we encourage the public in the affected areas of the Lower Passaic to stay informed and involved in this integrated effort to clean and restore the watershed," said Col. Richard J. Polo Jr., U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District Engineer.

"The Lower Passaic River Restoration Project is critical for the vitality of this urbanized river and surrounding harbor system," said Richard Gimello, New Jersey Department of Transportation, Executive Director of Intermodal Services. "The CIP is our footprint to successfully gain consensus throughout the life of this project in order to achieve a meaningful, comprehensive watershed solution."

"NOAA and its co-trustees in the U.S. Department of the Interior and New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection embrace this opportunity to expand public participation in the cleanup and restoration of the Passaic River ecosystem. In particular, we look forward to the public's input to identify options and opportunities for restoring the natural resources of this nationally important estuary," said Richard W. Spinrad, Ph.D., Assistant Administrator, Ocean Services and Coastal Zone Management, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

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Together, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are conducting a comprehensive study of the Lower Passaic River watershed to determine how best to clean and restore it. Also underway is the Newark Bay Study, which is being performed under EPA oversight to investigate contamination in the Newark Bay watershed and to evaluate potential options to address this contamination, if necessary. Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration actions by Trustees also will be considered and coordinated with the EPA study.

The draft CIP will ensure that the public can be involved in, and informed about, those activities and decisions that have potential impacts on local communities. The draft CIP is designed to:

- Provide the public with accurate and timely information needed to understand the projects as they move forward;
- Provide the public with the opportunity to give informed and meaningful input;
- Ensure adequate time and opportunity for the public to provide input and for that input to be considered;
- Respect and give full consideration to community input; and
- Assist the public in understanding the project decision-making process and the community's role in that process.

In developing the draft CIP, the partners gathered extensive public input, including conducting detailed community interviews in 2004 and earlier this year. The partner agencies have been proactive and responsive to the community's concerns and needs. The agencies recently activated a "lowerpassaic listserv" (a free, subscription-based electronic news distribution system); held a Passaic River Symposium; awarded a Technical Assistance Grant to the Passaic River Coalition; and created the Lower Passaic River Restoration Project and Newark Bay Study project Web sites. The agencies have also begun working with municipalities throughout the project area to provide information on the projects and to ensure they have opportunities for input in project plans.

The proposed CIP is available electronically and in print. Electronic versions may be obtained on the project Web sites at www.ourpassaic.org and www.ournewarkbay.org and on CD-ROM. Print versions of the proposed CIP are also available for review at the information repositories located at the Newark Public Library, the Elizabeth Public Library and at the EPA Records Center in New York City. The formal comment period for the CIP begins August 18 and ends October 3, 2005. Public forums will be held to discuss the draft CIP, upcoming surveys and sampling activities, and the environmental dredging and decontamination pilot being performed by the partner agencies. The forums will be held in Rutherford on September 14 at the Rutherford Public Library (located at 150 Park Avenue, Rutherford, NJ) from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. and in Newark on September 15 at the East Side High School (located at 238 Van Buren Street, Newark, NJ) from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m.